

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION



Developmental evaluation involves long-term relationships between evaluators and project or programme staff. Evaluation is ongoing, which means that feedback can be provided on a continuous basis.

Development evaluation is particularly appropriate for projects or programmes working in complex or uncertain environments. It is primarily designed to support learning and management decision-making.

Developmental Evaluation is a concept first promoted by Michael Patton. It involves long-term relationships between evaluators and project or programme staff. In developmental evaluation, the job of the evaluator is to facilitate discussions around evaluative questions, and encourage project / programme managers and staff to continuously collect, analyse and use information in order to support ongoing decision-making.

Because evaluation is ongoing, rather than carried out at specific points, feedback can be provided on a continuous basis. This in turn means that adjustments to projects and programmes can be made on an ongoing basis. Development evaluation is therefore an approach to evaluation that is particularly appropriate for work in complex or uncertain environments, where evidence-based decision-making is required throughout a project or programme.

Some of the main differences between developmental and traditional evaluation are as follows (see Patton 2006, Dozois et. al. 2010).

- Traditional evaluation is sometimes carried out primarily to demonstrate accountability to donor or government agencies. Development evaluation is always primarily focused on learning in order to improve performance within the project or programme being evaluated.
- Traditional evaluations are usually carried out over relatively short time periods by external consultants. In developmental evaluation the evaluator is embedded within a project or programme as a member of the team, and works with the team on an ongoing basis.
- Rather than simply providing recommendations at the end of an evaluation, development evaluators take a more active role in shaping the course of a project or programme. This always involves providing ongoing advice and recommendations, and may also involve taking part in management decision-making.
- In a traditional evaluation, tools, methods and approaches may be chosen to support the needs of external agencies, and may be pre-defined at the start of a project or programme. In development evaluation they are chosen according to the needs of the project or programme at the time.

- Traditional evaluations often assess projects and programmes against pre-defined objectives and indicators. In developmental evaluation the objectives and indicators may be constantly changing in the light of emerging evidence. Developmental evaluations often pay more attention to evaluative questions, rather than focusing too much on objectives and indicators.

When to use developmental evaluation

Developmental evaluation is particularly suited to projects or programmes that:

- operate in uncertain situations, where the external environment is constantly changing;
- are concerned with innovation, replication or mainstreaming, where a key purpose of the project or programme is to assess what works and what doesn't, rather than following established pathways to change; and
- require collaboration amongst many different stakeholders from different organisations or sectors.

Basically, development evaluation is most appropriate when working in complex environments where the route to change is non-linear and cannot easily be predicted beforehand. Although developmental evaluation is primarily designed to support learning and management decision-making, in many situations the same findings can also be used to provide accountability to different stakeholders.

How it works

How is development evaluation practiced? In the words of Dozois et. al. (2010, p26) "*any way that works*". There are no fixed steps or templates for carrying out developmental evaluation. The way in which it is applied is very dependent on context. What works in one time and place will not necessarily work in another. For example, at different times developmental evaluations might involve or utilise systematic monitoring, formal or informal reviews, traditional evaluations, formal research, action-oriented

research, sensemaking, or any other process or method designed to assess performance or generate lessons.

A key point with developmental evaluation is to start it as soon as possible. Developmental evaluation can play an important role in the early stages of a development intervention by helping to adjust the design of a project or programme, or by helping to shape initial plans. If introduced too late in the process it will not be able to contribute to these areas.

Challenges

There are many challenges associated with developmental evaluation. Some of the major ones are listed below (see Gamble 2008, *ibid*).

- Objectivity is often considered important in evaluations. In developmental evaluation the evaluator is embedded within a team. Sometimes developmental evaluators are external consultants and sometimes they are hired by the project or programme being evaluated. Either way, some may be concerned that developmental evaluations are less objective because the evaluator forms part of the management team, rather than being completely independent.
- Budgeting for developmental evaluation is often difficult because the design of the evaluation is emergent. It is impossible to predict at the start how much money will be spent on a developmental evaluation because it is not known which issues will arise over the course of a project or programme. This may have implications for contractual arrangements, which need to be more flexible as a result.
- Developmental evaluation may result in very large amounts of data being generated. A high level of data (or knowledge) management is therefore required to ensure a project or programme does not become overwhelmed with data.

- Developmental evaluation requires different kinds of personalities and competencies than other kinds of evaluation. The ability to think strategically, identify emerging patterns, build relationships with different stakeholders, communicate with different groups, and persuade others may be more important than knowledge and experience of traditional evaluation methods. High levels of flexibility, curiosity and intelligence are also required, because developmental evaluation requires developing new approaches, rather than following step-by-step processes developed by others.
- Developmental evaluation requires a lot of time to do well, and is often carried out over months and years, rather than short, intensive periods. Obviously, this has implications for financial costs, as well as the time required for other stakeholders to engage with the process. This means there is often an onus on development evaluators to prove that the process is worthwhile. In other words to ensure that the benefits of developmental evaluation outweigh the costs.

It is worth noting that many of the same challenges are faced by monitoring and evaluation (M&E) staff in many different organisations and complex programmes. Indeed, in many ways there is little difference between developmental evaluation and ongoing efforts by M&E staff to monitor and evaluate complex programmes of work. This is especially true if developmental evaluators are hired by the project or programme concerned, rather than being appointed as external consultants.

In either case the challenges are great, and addressing them requires ability, intelligence, flexibility, honesty and often a huge amount of patience as well. But the potential rewards are also great. Done well, developmental evaluation – as with ongoing M&E in complex programmes – can help significantly shape management decision-making in order to improve the quality and performance of development interventions operating in complex or difficult environments.

Further reading and resources

Two related papers in the M&E Universe cover utilisation-focused evaluation and M&E systems in complex programmes and organisations.



Utilisation-focused evaluation



Overview of complex M&E systems

The paper by Dozois et. al. (2010), referenced below, provides a very useful overview of the practical application of developmental evaluation, based on a 3-year multi-site case study of several developmental evaluations. Michael Patton has written a book on development evaluation, which is shown below.

- Patton, M (2010). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

References

- Dozois, E; Langlois, M and Blanchet-Cohen, N (2010). *A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation*. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the International Institute for Child Rights and Development. Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

- Gamble, J (2008). *A Developmental Evaluation Primer*. The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- Patton, M.Q. (2006). "Evaluation for the Way We Work", in *the Non-profit Quarterly*. Vol. 13 (1): 28-33.

Author(s):
Nigel Simister

INTRAC is a not-for-profit organisation that builds the skills and knowledge of civil society organisations to be more effective in addressing poverty and inequality. Since 1992 INTRAC has provided specialist support in monitoring and evaluation, working with people to develop their own M&E approaches and tools, based on their needs. We encourage appropriate and practical M&E, based on understanding what works in different contexts.

M&E Training & Consultancy

INTRAC's team of M&E specialists offer consultancy and training in all aspects of M&E, from core skills development through to the design of complex M&E systems.

Email: info@intrac.org

Tel: +44 (0)1865 201851



M&E Universe

For more papers in the M&E Universe series click the home button